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Towards a Sociological Analysis of London 2012

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Towards a Sociological Analysis of London 2012

Within this article, I focus on a number of productive scholarly avenues to which sociological analysis of London 2012 might want to attend. Understanding major sporting events—and thus the Olympic Games—as inextricably entangled with the media-industrial complex, I suggest London 2012 as a commodity spectacle that will emphasise gleaming aesthetics, a (sporting) city and nation collapsed into (simple) tourist images, and, the presentation of a particular expression of self within the logics of the global market. In so doing, and by peeking behind the seductive, corporate inspired veil of material and symbolic regeneration, image, strategy and legacy, we, as a field, can ask crucial questions about whose histories, whose representations and which peoples matter to, and for, the sporting spectacle.

Keywords: Heritage, Multiculturalism, London, Olympics, Regeneration, Spectacle, Tourism.

Towards a Sociological Analysis of London 2012

While the Olympic movement operated, for much of the 20th century, in a space somehow dislocated from the harsh realities of global tumult, the various Olympiads through which the movement became actualised have never been separated from their socio-political context. Indeed, the Olympic games has been closely sutured with various socio-political-economic trajectories: the use of the games as a platform for political posturing and the reshaping of the population (e.g. Berlin 1936; Beijing 2008), as part of the soft-core ideologies of the Cold War (e.g. Melbourne, 1956, Moscow, 1980, Lake Placid, 1980, Los Angeles, 1984), as a component in the re-imaging of place (e.g. Tokyo, 1964, Barcelona, 1992), as an element in the context of state and vernacular terrorism (e.g. Mexico, 1968; Munich, 1972), and, in the post-9/11 reconstitution of US domestic and foreign relations (Silk & Falcoux, 2005; 2010). Within this paper, I centre on potentially productive avenues (far from prescriptive) to which sociological examination of London 2012 might attend.

There are, of course, numerous sociological questions to be asked, many of which will relate to the five priority themes (climate change, waste reduction, inclusion, biodiversity, healthy living) on which the bid to host the Games was won. These themes have been translated into key legacies: ‘concrete’ benefits (the physical regeneration of the industrial waste ground of the Lower Lea Valley area of East London); health benefits (through getting people, especially through school sport, active); environmental benefits (through making the Olympic Park a footprint for sustainable living); and a socio-economic legacy that stresses that the UK is a creative, inclusive and welcoming place to live, visit, and do business (Falcoux & Silk, 2010; DCMS 2008; Evans 2007; London 2012 Sustainability plan, 2007). These themes and legacies raise a multitude of questions, not limited to those over: the measurement of sustainable legacy and environmental impact; the endurance of participation health legacies (for example for children in school Physical Education or the ‘swim for free’ scheme); the role of multinationals and sponsorship in major events (and how ‘success’ may be measured by such organizations); global/national/local identity projects; the intra, inter- and supra-national politics ingrained within the Olympic movement; the ways in which gender, race and class relations are played out through events and media coverage; the role of social media in documenting the Games (and the differences between ‘official’ and unofficial (counter) imaged

and written interpretations of the Games); whether 'success' (measured through medals) actually results in a national 'feel-good' factor or plays into measurement of well-being by the Office of National Statistics; debates over the logic of spending public monies on such an event in the context of cuts to public services; the securitisation of London during the Games; shifts in labour before, during and after the Games; or, the various human rights protests and resistance movements against the Olympics (during the Winter Games in Vancouver 2010 for example, protests emerged around increased homelessness in the city, civil liberties, gentrification, the destruction of the environment, ballooning public debt, migrant labour, security, criminalisation of the poor, corporate profiteering, and, the repression of dissent). Further, different groups will experience the Games, and be impacted by them, in many different ways. Viewing the event via whatever form of electronic media or reading about the Games in national newspapers will likely offer a very different experience and be interpreted differently than being physically present at the event. The experience of those re-housed to make way for Olympic infrastructure will be qualitatively different than one of the many volunteers who temporarily inhabit the vicinity of the Games. The participants themselves will have markedly different experiences: will the athlete who supplements his/her body with (performance enhancing) substances that are deemed to be illegal by the International Olympic Committee be able to avoid detection; will athletes use the Games as a springboard for defection (Cuba, for example, lost 5 boxers through defection between Athens 2004 and Beijing 2008); or, how will the young athlete cope with the (often parasitic) media attention surrounding their heroic feat or apparently newsworthy celebrity status (one can imagine that triple-gold medalist sprinter Usain Bolt experienced the 2008 Olympic Games rather differently than Caster Semenya did the 2009 Athletics World Championships at which she subject to gender verification testing following her gold-medal victory in the 800 metres).

There are also important questions surrounding inclusivity and exclusion: who becomes part of the Games, which groups are excluded? Will certain groups, post-Olympics, have an altered sense of national identity or cohesion, or will others still, feel further distanced from 'Britishness'? Will Stratford, the epicenter of the Games, be experienced in a qualitatively different way by different groups in society? And, will population data, crime figures, the housing index and so on in this parcel of London be drastically altered as a result of hosting the Olympic Games? Sociological examination of the Games will

clearly attend to questions ranging from the most global to the most intimate; I return to some of these concerns in the conclusion to this article. Those that I focus on in this paper however, are the avenues of inquiry endemic to understanding London 2012 as a mediated mega-event (Roche, 2000). Thus the potential lines of inquiry followed in this paper are grounded in the implosion of sport into media spectacle (Kellner, 2003). The paper is organized into four main sections. I begin through discussion of the sporting spectacle. Building on this discussion, the subsequent three sections address debates surrounding the façade of urban transformations around the Olympic site within the context of global capital, the role of historical knowledge in the Olympic spectacle, and, the ways in which diversity, multiculturalism and difference are bound with national Games narratives.

The Sporting Spectacle

Grounded in Mandel's (1999) assertions about the intensified capitalisation of ever more intimate realms of everyday life, cultural forms became central to the instantiation and experience of late capitalism (cf. Andrews, 2006; 2009; Jameson, 1991). Sport, as Andrews (1999; 2006) persuasively argues, as a legitimate cultural industry, is a particularly lucrative site for the accumulation of capital. He argues that professional sports are "brazenly commercial enterprises, that make no pretense as to the cardinal importance of delivering entertaining products designed to maximize profit margins" (Andrews 1999, p. 76). Indeed, with Kellner (2003), Andrews (2006) points to the centrality of the evolution of sport with the rhythms and regimes of an expanding media-industrial complex, such that there exists a seductive "consumerist union of commerce, sport and television" (Rowe, 1996, p. 566). At least since the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, the Olympic Games are a correlative to a consumer society that requires consumption and the appropriation of spectacle to reproduce itself (Kellner, 2003, see also Andrews, 1999; Billings, 2008; Boyle & Haynes, 2009; Tomlinson, 2002; Whannel, 1992). In this sense, and drawing on Debord (1994 [1967]) the Olympic sporting mega-event is part of the broader social forces that nurture and sustain a consumption economy, a seductive spectacle that fascinates the denizens of society (Kellner, 2003). As such, and somewhat reworking Andrews (2006), the spectacular principles and practices advanced by mediated sporting mega-events reproduces the world of the commodity / consumer society, acting as a generative and unifying locus that exemplifies the "historical moment at which the commodity

completes its colonization of social life . . . commodities are now all there is to see; the world we see is the world of the commodity” (Debord 1994 [1967], 29).

When Debord (1990 [1988]) returned to his earlier works through ‘Comments on the Society of the Spectacle’ he emphasized the integrated spectacle. He suggested this as a new, heightened stage in the evolution of the society of the spectacle in which the “autocratic reign of the market economy” has reached a new level of rational efficiency, such that the “spectacle has never before put its mark to such a degree on almost the full range of socially produced behavior and objects” (Debord 1990 [1988], 2, 9). In this regard, the integrated spectacle points to which some of the contradictions inherent in the increased governance of the marketplace—in terms of the commercial direction of social practices and subjectivities: the Olympic games, as sporting spectacle, then can deeply influence thought and action, acting as tool of pacification and depoliticisation (cf. Andrews, 2006; 2009; Kellner, 2003). In this regard, following McCarthy, Giardina, Park and Harewood (2005, p.138), the London 2012 Olympic Games is sutured into and through this context, an institution that actively works as a “pedagogical site to hegemonically re-inscribe and represent neoliberal discourses on sport, culture, nation, and democracy throughout the ascendant global capitalist order.”

It is perhaps nowhere more so than in the affectively charged realm of the ‘popular’—of which sport is clearly a central component—that the intersecting vectors of race, national identity, and cultural signification come together (cf. Giardina, 2005; Rowe et al, 1998; Miller et al, 2001). That is, understanding sport as a particularly ‘lustrous’ and affective cultural form which constitutes part of what Stuart Hall termed ‘narratives of nation’, sporting discourses, practices and experiences have often been mobilised and appropriated by dominant groups to (re)define the parameters of *the* ‘sanctioned’ identity (e.g. Tomlinson & Young, 2006). In Britain, re-examinations of British identities in the context of wide-ranging transitions associated with the post-Imperial, post-Cold War era has featured sporting manifestations in varying ways (e.g. Abell et al. 2007). As Robinson (2008) notes, sport provides a tool par excellence for negotiating ideas of nation, class and race ‘after Empire’, and the apparent ‘void’ of Englishness given alienation and displacement following disruption to an accustomed place in the United Kingdom (see Aughey, 2010; Kumar, 2010).

In the balance of this paper then, I focus on an understanding of the Games as a highly mediated commodity spectacle. As with any spectacular edifice, these 'neoliberal politics of spectacle' (Waitt 2008) bear forth some uncomfortable truths. For, while such strategising proffers gleaming aesthetics, a (sporting) city and nation collapsed into (simple) tourist images, and, the presentation of a particular expression of self within the logics of the global market, important questions remain about the relevance and morality of such spaces and their symbolism for the wider urban / national citizenry. Thus, I offer tentative, yet productive, avenues for our scholarly investigations into London 2012, raising concerns about whose representations, whose histories and which peoples matter to, and for, the sporting spectacle.

The Façade of Glurbanisation

Under the influence of the market-oriented dictates derived from neoliberal policy regimes there has been a conclusive (re)turn (in economic and emotive senses, as well as materially) to the city, leading to the dramatic (re)capitalization of selected city landscapes (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; MacLeod, 2002). One of the central infrastructural legacies to be delivered through London 2012 is the regeneration of an impoverished part of East London. The games will be held in a concentrated geographic area: the Olympic Park. Located in the Lower Lea Valley area of northeast London, the area was previously known as a site for noxious industries, a perennial dumping ground for waste products, and, a haven for artists and traveler communities (Gold & Gold, 2008). While there is contestation over the human cost (e.g. with regard to forced evictions, business removal, (un)employment for local workers, environmental impact), the Olympic park and associated infrastructural and transportation developments in Stratford form the epicenter of one of Europe's largest regeneration sites (Gold & Gold, 2008).

Fully in line with a neoliberal urban politics that stresses the aesthetics of place, the systematic renaissance, creation, and tender management of specific landscapes in the resuscitation of their (symbolic and economic) value, the regeneration of the Lower Lea Valley of London is emblematic of the processes through which select parcels of urban spaces have become, are in the process of becoming, spectacular consumptive environments predicated on capital leisure spaces (Silk & Amis, 2005; MacLeod, 2002; Waitt, 2008). Hosting the Olympic spectacle is, as Broudehoux (2007) has argued, essential to the survival of postindustrial cities and one of the most effective ways for a city to enhance their world image. Paraphrasing Debord (1967, 169), London 2012 can be seen as part of the process through which

capitalism remakes the totality of space in its own setting, one which is directly regulated by the imperatives of consumption and in which the building of frenzied temples of consumption are leading the city to the point of consuming itself. Indeed, for Debord (1967, 169), tourism is “merely human circulation considered as consumption, a by-product of the circulation of commodities,” as such it is relatively unsurprising that competitive city re-imaging for the external tourist market has been central in the build up to the Games. Working in concert with the organising committee—LOCOG—has been a number of semi-autonomous public-private partnerships (among, for example, Visit Britain, Visit London, the Department for Culture, Media & Sport) attempting to capitalise on the immense possibilities the Games provide to showcase a specific image of place to leave a lasting tourist legacy (Visit Britain, 2009; DCMS, 2007).

The tourism strategy has been manifest in discussions between Visit Britain and Olympic rights holders (such as NBC) with regard to ‘influencing’ how Britain will be portrayed through the Games and by the provision of a “stock of inspirational imagery that associates the destination with the 2012 Games while ensuring that Britain is seen as the ultimate star” (Visit Britain 2010, p. 9). Further, as part of a new ‘Brand Britain’, Visit Britain has developed an Olympic Games strategy keyed on an essence that defines Britain as Timeless, Dynamic and Genuine. Based in a desire to fully exploit the tourist benefits to be derived from the Games, the strategy sets out to describe the place, culture and people of Britain in a way that appeals to a new and younger market. The strategy positions Britain as a positive and engaging nation, at home with its rich cultural heritage but embracing change and open to new ideas, with a welcoming and world class capital city (Visit Britain, 2010, p.16). The brand proposition to be played out through the Games suggests that while strength lies in Britain’s diversity, one aspect rings true for all: Britain inspires. It does so through being ‘timeless’ (places such as the Peak District Lake, the Oxford and Cambridge Boat race, castles, cathedrals, the Beatles and Harry Potter), having ‘genuine’ people (real stories from real people such as a friendly taxi driver or pub landlord), and, through dynamism (culture; the energy of London fashion week, the Notting Hill carnival, an ‘up for it attitude’ that is the driving force behind the likes of Gordon Ramsey, Danny Boyle and Richard Branson) (Visit Britain, 2010, pp. 20/1).

Drawing on Jessop’s (1997) concept of glurbanization—an amalgam of globalization and urbanization—the pathways that London has taken towards maintaining its global city status appear

centered on the presentation of a particular ‘capital’ (in both senses of the word) image. Collapsing the global and the local, the reconfiguration of the East end of London is relational to global understandings of what matters in, and for, a global city (Matusitz, 2010). In this sense, *the* local that matters is capital space and its valorized consumer, the citizen who is connected to the signifiers of the regenerated global community, the places of representation—“the new monumentalities of spectacle and consumerism” (Harvey, 1993, p.24) evident in the Olympic park and Stratford. Middle-class consumers become ‘synonymous with the well-being of the city’ and any opposition to this ‘general interest’ (such as ongoing class and community divisions regarding the support and enjoyment of spectacular urban environments or critical voices about sporting spectacles) can be downplayed or ignored altogether (Gruneau, 2002; Horne & Manzenreiter, 2006). The danger here is that only specific local assets and resources—those conducive to the market and the tourist gaze—become exploited and selected consumerised representations of place take centre stage and are used temporarily to showcase place to the world. In this sense, *the* image of place that becomes abstracted from local culture and translated into marketable meanings of place is often sharply differentiated from the surrounding urban landscape (Judd, 1999). Indeed, for London, with questions over the availability of ‘affordable housing’ and increasing rental prices in and around the Lower Lea valley (see e.g. Games Monitor, 2010) important issues arise with regard to ‘(dis)connections’ to space (Castells, 1996). Specifically, will the presentation of this urban aesthetic mean that London (and by association, selected elements of Britain deemed relevant as part of the tourist marketing mix) is presented as an “elitist landscape devoid of a local sense of place” (Yeoh & Chang, 2001, p. 1035)?

The Commodification of Pastness

For Debord, the annihilation of historical knowledge is central to the reign of the perpetual present (see Crary, 1989). That is, Debord reasoned, in his discussion of spectacular time, that history is used as a form of irreversibility (a flat, motionless and fixed concept as opposed to a process in which participation and personalisation is possible) by those who control and accumulate surplus capital; as such representations of the past sediment (or reorganise) power relations. In this sense, again paraphrasing Debord (1967, 158), through the paralysis of history and memory the spectacle is able to hold the present in perpetuity. The ‘use’ of history in the London 2012 spectacle thus raises important questions over the

fixidity of historical representations, and indeed, over the work of those who control capital and the agency of those who consume it. More accurately addressed as heritage—the meanings attached to the past in the present—institutional actors have come to see the careful use of the past as perhaps “the most important single resource for international tourism” and city remodeling (Graham, 2002, p. 1007; see also Chhabra, Healey & Sills, 2003; Poria, Butler & Airey, 2003; Waitt, 2000). Given the potential vacuity of the term and its often uncritical appropriation, in our sociological examinations of London 2012, we need to think of heritage as both a cultural product and an economic resource; one imagined, defined, articulated, and, exploited as a primary component of strategies to promote tourism, economic development and urban regeneration (Graham, 2002). Further, it is crucial for us to problematise heritage and think critically about how certain heritage narratives communicate the (g)local to the global and provide a mechanism whereby city authorities can refashion sites and direct the tourist gaze towards a (limited) range of interpretations (Waitt, 2000). Critically then, we need to understand how the use of heritage is imbued with power relations, reproduces the concept of a spatially constructed, localized, mnemonic (device to assist memory) unity, and, legitimates power structures by symbolising who belongs in specific places (cf. Graham, 2002; Zukin, 1995).

Which (his)stories form part of the ‘timeless’ Britishness expunged by Visit Britain remains to be played out. Following previous work on sporting spectacle, it is likely that the deployment of selective histories for use in the present will be a central component of the ‘cultural presentation’ segments of the London 2012 opening ceremony. For example, in Salt Lake City in 2002, certain histories that supported the US geo-political-military trajectory featured prominently (Silk & Falcous, 2005), while in Beijing 2008, the past—in the form of ancient parts of the city—was, quite literally, destroyed to ensure a modern, vibrant and forward thinking (pseudo-capitalist) China was presented to the world (Zhang & Silk, 2007). Insights emerge from the 8-minute presentation given over to London 2012 at the closing ceremony of the Beijing Olympics. Beginning with an animated clip, a London bus wound through the streets of London (and indeed morphing in places into a tube map), passed iconic buildings such as the London eye, Houses of Parliament, Big Ben, St. Paul’s Cathedral, the Swiss Life Building, the Royal Albert Hall, the Tate Gallery, and meandered along the Embankment prior to emerging in front of Buckingham Palace where a punk coolly points to the camera while two ‘Berskin’ Palace foot-guards march off camera. In

the Bird Nest stadium in Beijing, following this short animation, a ‘real’ bus circled the stadium, accompanied by dancers in Bowler hats who queued at a bus stop and lined up to cross the famed Abbey road crossing. As the bus toured the stadium, it gradually changed in shape and form to resemble a London skyline cut out of hedgerow, out of which, winner of a reality television show (*The X-Factor*) Leona Lewis—from East London—emerged (accompanied by guitarist, Jimmy Page) to sing a version of the Led Zeppelin classic, ‘Whole lotta Love.’ As the song reached its conclusion, English ‘icon’ David Beckham emerged from the roof of the ‘bus’ (accompanied by a 10 year girl who had won a *Blue Peter* competition to be part of the ceremony) and duly kicked a football into the crowd. A blend of old and new, a vision of tradition spliced with youth, diversity and ‘cool’, it is difficult to know quite what to make of the handover and how this will be translated into the London 2012 spectacle. Suffice to say, the ‘iconic’ images chosen as part of the Visit Britain Olympic strategising offer few surprises: the White Cliffs, Stonehenge, a cup of tea, Nelson’s column, Windsor castle, a taxi, the Houses of Parliament, the Angel of the North, the London Eye, and, a telephone box give the impression that ‘tradition’ will, at least, form part of the mainstay image of London 2012. Further, the images of London, and indeed, of ‘lifestyle’ being made available to the worlds press and rights holders in advance of the Games do little to challenge established hierarchies, traditions and power relations (see <http://www.britainonview.co.uk/gallery.html>). This initial reading is bolstered by the use of heritage sites by LOCOG as central elements in the hosting of certain events. As part of discussions between the organising committee and DCMS sectoral organisations (including English Heritage, Historic Royal Palaces (HRP), and the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment), iconic heritage sites will form the backdrop for many events. As such, the image of certain Royal Parks and open spaces will offer dramatic ‘scenery’ for the mediated London Spectacle. The Royal Parks will host a number of events including Triathlon in Hyde Park, cycling in Regent’s Park and beach volleyball in Horse Guards Parade (Gibson, 2010). Further, drawing on the template devised by Sydney in 2000, LOCOG are currently in discussion with the Royal Parks about the use of giant screens in Hyde Park and other locations for live screening of the Games, and as venues for the festivals and other events planned for the Cultural Olympiad. Indeed, Greenwich Park will be the location for the equestrian competition; a decision made about ‘image’—that of the backdrop of the park and Buckingham palace—over history and environment, the removal of 3000 trees and the

construction of a temporary 23000 seat stadia which will disturb, if not destroy, historical artefacts, 300 year old Sweet chestnut tress, bat habitats, and the wildlife chain (Gibson, 2010).

As such, it is pertinent for sociologists to ask questions over what is marketed as 'history', the political dimensions of heritage, whose version of the past is rolled out during London 2012 and, by corollary, whose is silenced, marginalised, or destroyed (see Sumner, 2009). A central question emerges, to whose past does such imaging bear resemblance (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 1990; Waitt, 2000)? While it is recognized such environments are polysemic, and will be experienced, consumed, and indeed, performed, differently (Poria et. al., 2003), sociological examination of London 2012 must address the relative power to control historical knowledge (and forget or silence other histories), the power to disseminate such knowledge, and the distortion, disappearance, or staging, of the 'authentic' in the name of capital (Chhabra et. al., 2003). We must then recognise how the use of the past in the London sporting spectacle is more about a political or ideological appropriation of history (for Debord, the 'fixing' or 'paralysis' of the past) than with conveying historical veracity. Following Graham (2002), this can aid Sociology develop understanding of how very selective material artefacts, mythologies, memories and traditions—that fail to move beyond the ephemeral and contingent—in the London 2012 spectacle may play a functional role in social and structural inequalities and mask long-term social and political continuities (Graham, 2002).

The Quest for Sameness

The glurban focus on the spectacular aesthetic environment and the paralysis of the past finds its corporeal corollary in the engineering of (local) identities that are tied to, or functional for, the neoliberal politics of spectacle. In the reinvention of tradition and the reshaping of the past, cultural producers often engage in processes that refurbish the ethnic core of the people (Featherstone, 1995), leading to a reconstitution of collective identities along pluralistic and multicultural lines that reformulates regional and ethnic differences and diversity. Such place-making often involves a search for the comforts of sameness in terms of shared identity (instead of plurality) (Sennett, 1999). In this regard, and as demonstrated at the Kuala Lumpur Commonwealth Games (see Silk 2002), at the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games (see Hogan, 2003), at the Salt Lake City Olympic Games (see Silk & Falcoux, 2005), and at the Delhi 2010 Commonwealth Games (see Bhan, 2009), every aesthetic power of illusion is mobilised in an attempt to

mask existing class, racial and ethnic cleavages. These are processes then which often consolidate power relations and ask very important questions about which peoples matter, and thereby which do not, to the sporting spectacle. 'Citizens' antithetical to market 'logics' become erased (at least from the mediated spectacle), hidden from view, subject to new penal codes, or, physically moved to the urban peripheries—as with the forced evictions, displacement and compulsory purchasing orders on the Clays Lane Estate (among others) in the build up to 2012 (see Porter et. al., 2009). In this sense, there emerges a bifurcation of the (urban) social formation, in which those who are different, those who threaten the 'normative universality' of the society of the (sporting) spectacle become subject to measures that will secure the extension, maintenance, reproduction, and management of the consequences of market rule (Silk & Andrews, 2008). Of course, difference exists and is often incorporated, but in the construction of unity or sameness, difference is often reduced to a stylized exotic (see Hall, 1991) packaged and palatable for a global audience, a surface aesthetic that "elides the real significances of material difference into mere symbolic novelty, producing the comforting sense that we are all under one skin" (Banjeree and Linstead, 2001, p.705).

Sporting contexts have served as spaces through which assertions of devolved multicultural 'Britishness' have been played out (see Carrington 1998, Garland, 2004; Robinson, 2008). As Garland (2004) notes, these post-imperial re-anchoring are not necessarily more inclusive and egalitarian; they are frequently underscored by myopic and jingoistic xenophobia. Somewhat in line with the tourist strategy, London 2012 has been seen as an opportunity to re-brand a post-imperial, multicultural Britain under the aegis of global terror (both state and non-state) and neoliberal globalisation. Indeed, the opening paragraphs of the official bid documents submitted to the IOC by the London 2012 bid emphasised London's role as a beacon for world youth, diversity and cultural experience (London 2012 Candidate File, 2005, p.1). During the bidding process, there was a concerted focus on a vibrancy keyed on diversity, harmony and multiculturalism, much of which played on the multicultural character of the five 'Olympic boroughs' (Greenwich, Hackney, Newham, Tower Hamlets, Waltham Forest). Visual imagery heavily focused on representations of multi-ethnic youthful diversity and the apparent regenerative power of sport/Olympism. Most prominent were athletes and former athletes who were bestowed the title 'London 2012 Ambassadors'; the most notable and repeatedly at the forefront of promotions were Black-British

and Asian-British athletes. This presence was, it appears, seen as important with regard to global competitive advantage; a powerful pedagogical space to assert a ‘successful’ multiculturalism as Britain’s distinctive, and *highly marketable*, marker in the current world order (Newman 2007, cf. The London 2012 Sustainability Plan, 2007) This is especially the case for “people who are not currently as fully engaged as they might be in *our* economic, sporting, social and cultural life: women, people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) groups, older people, disabled people, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) people, and people from different faith communities” (London 2012 Sustainability Plan, 2007, p. 40, emphasis added). Taking ‘our’ social and cultural life as ‘normal’ (and my reading of this suggests that ‘our’ refers to the white middle-class) clearly distinguishes an ‘other’ who ‘we invite’ to the party. Yet, under what conditions? Returning to the presence, indeed foregrounding, of Black-British and Asian-British athletes in the bid process asserts a ‘multiculturalist nationalism’ (Fortier 2005, p.560) in which citizens are not only ‘let in’, but redefined as integral to the self image of the nation as ‘tolerant’ and ‘inclusive’. Critically, their role is contingent on toeing the line(s) in several ways—corporate, nationalist, conservative, and gendered—as ‘appropriate’ national subjects. This particular observation is not new, having been made by both Burdsey (2008) and Carrington (2001) who capture the contingent nature in which black and Asian Britons have been ‘allowed’ to signify the dominant conservative (white) sporting national culture. Following Fortier (2005), an exceptionally interesting sociological direction in analysis of London 2012 concerns the representation of ‘familiar others’ and how race forms part of a spectacle that symbolises conservative, corporatised ‘Britishness’. In other words, will the ‘other’ be ‘included’ as legitimate multicultural racialised subjects, or will that inclusion be contingent; ‘difference’ might be allowed, but will it only be ‘allowed’ in bounded ways? Indeed, as Waitt (2000) argued in relation to the Sydney Olympics in 2000, while cultural difference was celebrated through distinctive cultural artefacts and around a cohesive unity and social equality, there was far less acceptance of cultural difference when framed in terms of spatial concentration, social injustices (unemployment, displacement and drug abuse), or where different land uses were perceived as threats to dominant norms. Following Waitt (2000), our work thus needs to consider if and how the sources of greatest conflict—religious spaces such as Mosques or ethnic separation—become part of a celebration of a successful British multiculturalism, or indeed, if such differences are silenced.

The London 2012 bid's representation of a harmonious multicultural Britain—no matter how contingent, ephemeral or mythical—is also entangled with material and discursive constitutions of (global) terrorism. The day following the announcement that London had been awarded the Games (met with huge celebrations in Trafalgar Square), a series of coordinated suicide bombs were detonated on London's transport system which gave weight to ongoing reassessments of 'Britishness' and a quest for core national values. The fact that three of the four suicide-bombers were young, middle-class, British citizens intensified media and political commentaries (from all points of the spectrum) surrounding security, national identity, and multiculturalism (Falcous & Silk, 2010). When juxtaposed with the bidding rhetoric, the response to the bombings revealed the ambiguities and limitations of the strident assertion of inclusive multicultural Britain that the bid had promulgated. Following Gilroy (2004) and Stephens (2007), there was a return to a Blitz narrative that conjured an image of a distinctly white, wartime London and the deployment of a binarism centered on good (us) and evil (the bombers)—those who do not get to play a role in defining 'our way of life' and who are not deemed to be *properly British* (Stephens 2007). In this way, and even though the Olympic narratives celebrated difference, threat continues to lie with division; the appeal remains to a foundational unity, a nationalist narrative that asks 'us' to recover a lost moment of harmony (Stephens 2007).

The London 2012 spectacle provides Sociology with important questions surrounding how 'diversity' will be reconciled with unity and harmony, whether the Games act as a beacon for such harmony and a pillar of humanity, what Kundnani (2007, p. 27) has termed 'a new doctrine of 'community cohesion', or whether the Games will act as a *foci imaginarii* (Bauman, 1991) premised on the reassessment of diversity as an extraneous and disruptive element causing a crisis of nationhood. Raising questions over sameness, plurality, multiculturalism and difference will allow for sociological examination of identity through the 'soft' and 'benign' forms of nationalism (Stephens 2007) ingrained in the sporting spectacle. Our work should be sensitive to the role of corporatised, mediated sporting spectacles in the symbolic promotion of a multicultural nationalism. How, through the London spectacle, will narratives, ceremonies and rituals of multicultural Britishness play out in a civic multiculturalism (Modood, 2007) that emphasises strong multicultural or minority identities that complement a framework of vibrant, dynamic, national

narratives? Will we witness a proliferation of performative representations of hyphenated persons and culture(s) occupying leading spaces in corporatised mediated (sporting) spectacle? Will these be positive and progressive artefacts subverting the status quo, or will the majority of these iterations commonly efface the harsh realities witnessed in the everyday interactions of a diverse population? Will such representations speak more to what Giardina (2005)—developing hooks notion of stylish nihilism—terms a stylish hybridity in which multicultural performers take centre stage, yet offer but a thin veneer obscuring a (social) structure, that essentialises and stereotypes *difference*, and ignores the historically entrenched ‘race’-based inequalities responsible for (masked) social divisions (Troyna & Carrington 1990); little more than a marketable ‘boutique multiculturalism’ (Fish 1997)? While it would not be expected that the complexities of everyday life—hostility towards British Muslims; feelings of disillusionment and resentment; ‘Islamophobia’, urban segregation; disproportionate levels of unemployment, health, and poverty; and differential immigration statuses and the concomitant restrictions of rights, links between foreign and domestic policy (Modood, 2007; Pitcher, 2009; Rehman 2007; Stephens, 2007; Vertovec 2007)—will necessarily be played out through the games, our critical understanding of the games must attend to such complexities in the ‘presentation of self.’

Concluding Thoughts

In explicating and indexing scholarly directions for the sociological analysis of London 2012, I have focused on the tensions inherent when the spectacle stresses a sterile (commodity) aesthetic, a refashioning or paralysis of the past, and, a presentation of unity. The aim has been to raise questions that inform a sociological examination of the London Olympics; allowing for Sociology to explore the ‘emergent fissures’ (Horne & Manzenreiter, 2006) inherent in the presentation of Britain—through the Games—as a politically progressive nation. Our efforts need to ensure we peer behind this veneer, allowing us to understand and intervene into the various forms of inequality and social and economic polarisations that are, necessarily, endemic to the sporting spectacle. Further, and as Waitt (2000) argued in relation to Sydney 2000, we need to explore the silences, alternative stories, and, readings inherent in the sporting spectacle. Such exploration leads towards thinking about the diverse ways in which the Games will impact on different people and groups. While some, in Debordian terms, may be seduced by

the spectacle, as sociologists, we are in a unique position to address the multiple impacts of the Games. The questions raised in this discussion will lead some to think carefully about the commodification of the Games, the role of the media in emphasising certain images and marginalizing others, or, explore the contested notions of British sameness and difference. However, there will be other social, political and economic impacts and implications that begin to form a sociological agenda for examining London 2012. Taken together, this discussion and the questions raised in the introductory comments, provide a starting point for such examination.

Getting beneath London 2012, will, as Kellner (2008) suggests, allow us to think about passivity and activity, consumption and production. For, following Kellner (2008), rather than viewing the spectacle as an all encompassing, totalizing and monolithic society, sociological explorations can force a focus on the contestations, ambiguities and contradictions of the spectacle (what Kellner terms the reversal of the spectacle). For, as opposed to thinking of the 'spectator' as scripted and passive, consuming the "spectacle as an alienation from human potentiality for creativity and imagination" (Kellner, 2008, np.), our investigations can be attuned to the differential (passive and active) impacts of London 2012. This will require a variety of methodological approaches (ranging from the most traditional of sociological methods to the more 'avant-garde') that will enable us to gain critical insight into the ways in which such events are negotiated, enacted, performed, lived in and lived through, contested, and representative (McLeod, 2002). These are questions about which social groups actually benefit, which images and peoples are excluded from such a gaze, and what scope there is for contestation? We need to ensure our sociological agenda for London 2012 is peppered with diverse and different voices, from diverse and different places, about the contestation of spaces, histories and identities. That is, it is important to consider those bodies, histories and institutions constituted as antithetical to the workings of the market and thereby systematically, materially, physically and discursively excluded from the London 2012 spectacle. In this way, our investigations will not be an over deterministic and reductionist vision of sporting spectacle as a cataclysm of some homogenous neoliberalism; rather, it will allow Sociology to investigate the how the Games are a process that is being shaped, reshaped and challenged by the social and spatial practices of various groups and individuals (McCann, 1999). This is an opportunity to bring new value to identities and experiences that are marginalized and stigmatized by sporting spectacle; a sociological approach that understands the

multiple and intersecting social cleavages of London 2012 and does not imagine any one person, any one body, any one history, any one space as being more important than anyone else's. Indeed, for some groups not incorporated as part of the spectacle, the urban spaces popularly represented as dystopias (and thus subject to renewal, silencing, or marginalization) may actually be practiced as transgressive lived spaces of escape, refuge, employment and entertainment. Yet, we know little of such spaces or of the practices and experiences therein. In sum, and while the spectacle may well generate sameness, historical paralysis and a particular urban aesthetic, our sociological agenda need not do the same. Rather, through attention to production and consumption, passivity and agency, sociological analysis can, following Kellner (2008), position us to decipher the trends, social and political conflicts, and the fears and aspirations, of London 2012.

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